Many faculty members generally assume that their students understand the purposes of college learning and that they are aware of the assumptions about liberal education embedded in the program configurations designed to advance it. We implicitly believe and sincerely hope that, by following the steps we lay out, our students will develop the habits of heart and mind that characterize the outcomes of a liberal education. Yet this is not necessarily the case. In fact, it may very well be that, as Jerry Graff (2003) has suggested, our students are “clueless” about how to think about liberal learning; how it affects their personal, educational, and professional development; and how it plays a role in their day-to-day lives.

It is easy enough to test this; all we need to do is ask our students. Through the series of focus groups it commissioned to probe students’ understandings and perceptions of liberal education, as well as their attitudes about it, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has done just that. The findings reveal a “serious disconnect between what students value and the vision of liberal education championed by the AAC&U community” (Humphreys and Davenport 2005, 41). The learning outcomes the student participants said they value the least are tolerance and respect for different cultural backgrounds; values, principles, and ethics; expanded cultural awareness and sensitivity; and civic responsibility. And when asked for a definition of liberal learning, many of the students—especially those in high school—were simply at a loss. Overall, the focus group findings suggest that “colleges are not conveying the importance of liberal education to their students,” and that students’ lack of an understanding of liberal education hampers their ability to become intentional learners (Schneider and Humphreys 2005, B20).

The findings from the AAC&U student focus groups are not very surprising—indeed, they tend to follow upon and confirm similar findings from previous AAC&U studies (see Schneider 1993; AAC 1991). They are nonetheless troubling, however, and we must find effective ways to address the issues they raise. In this article, I argue that the advising process offers us perhaps the best opportunity for helping our students become more intentional about their own educations, as well as for helping them to recognize the value of the liberal learning outcomes we seek to advance. In order to make the most of this opportunity, however, we must rethink advising and explore new approaches that engage students more broadly. In short, I argue that advising must be reconceived as liberal learning.

Missed opportunities
The very learning outcomes that AAC&U found students value least are the ones my campus explicitly incorporated as part of its revised core, Values across the Curriculum. We worked hard to introduce our students to this new core program. We provided workshops; we encouraged advisers to view the core as a four-year program integrated across students’ undergraduate experiences; and we put together a detailed Web site outlining the philosophy behind the core, the different learning outcomes, and how the core opens the curriculum to students.

NED SCOTT LAFF is academic coordinator for the core curriculum and director of the first-year seminar at Loyola University Chicago.
as Liberal Learning

NED SCOTT LAFF
If students were accessing the Web site—and our data suggest they were—then they should have developed at least a basic understanding of the educational values inherent in the core program. They should have been able to engage their learning intentionally to craft a coherent liberal learning experience that would integrate with their studies in their major fields. Yet, when I asked my students straightforwardly what they thought about core liberal learning and what they understood about the core, their responses mirrored those of the students in the AAC&U focus groups.

I also pressed my students further, asking whether anyone had ever actually talked to them about the core. More specifically, I asked whether any of them had had conversations with their advisers about the nature of core learning, about how core learning can integrate with their overall undergraduate experiences, or about how their core learning could affect their personal and professional development. I asked this because advising is one of the best opportunities for students to talk about the values of liberal learning in practice. What they had “learned” is that the core was something they had to do; that it could be “knocked out” during their first two years; that if they did it right, they could find courses that would “knock off” both a Core Knowledge area and a Values area simultaneously; that their major and minors would “except” them for core areas; and, of course, that finding courses in which they were interested should help them become more “well-rounded.”

In other words, what I discovered by talking frankly with my students is that we were not conveying the importance of liberal learning through advising. Indeed, we were sending a different message altogether. Students were “learning” that the core is just another cafeteria menu. As Dean Baldwin (1998, 2) suggests, through advising centers, professional advisers, and degree audit systems, we teach students to “steer through the labyrinths of degree requirements and provide useful advice on career choices.” Baldwin argues that, when faced with a student’s interest in a business career or in medical studies, for example, advising services tend to take the paths of least resistance. Advisers are likely to recommend the student majors in business or in biology and then simply to pull out the corresponding requirement sheet. This is not the same as helping students understand liberal learning and its role in their overall educational thinking and planning.

Typically, advising systems are far removed from the classroom and the day-to-day liberal learning experiences that take place between faculty and students; advising operates with only a second-hand understanding of the nature of liberal learning. What students “learn” through advising rarely helps them appreciate the nature or the role of liberal learning, or its value in their lives. Thus, students experience advising as a process of course selection designed to help them meet their degree and registration requirements. We should not be surprised that students come away from the advising process with little understanding of, or commitment to, liberal learning. In order to help students better understand the nature of liberal learning and how it informs their overall undergraduate experiences, advising must be reconceived as a liberal learning experience in itself. Let me illustrate one way to accomplish this.

**Advising as problem-based learning**

A good problem-based learning approach, according to Kurt Burch (2001), presents to students ill-structured and logically fuzzy problems. Such problems challenge students to think about what they know; to reflect on what they do not understand, what they need to learn, and how to contextualize their learning; and to think about how what they carry with them can color the way they read and misread the problem. Problem-based learning drives students to use their learning in new contexts. It also can help them realize, in practical ways, the need to expand and incorporate different
types of learning in order to better understand and deal with open-endedness. Through a problem-based approach in class, students are challenged to see that we are constantly rethinking how we know things and to participate in that rethinking.

It does not require much of an analogic leap to see how, through a problem-based learning approach, advising can be reconceived as a collaborative process of teaching and research. Advising as problem-based learning can challenge students’ narrative imaginations and make them question what they value in their own learning. What do they think they know about studies in the major? Are faculty members simply “generic” professors in their majors, or are they field specialists whose interests span disciplinary boundaries? How does student learning in the major integrate with learning in the core and other studies across the curriculum? Would students engage their learning differently if they could see how their personal educational goals are reflected in the courses they take? Most importantly, depending on how the problem is posed in advising scenarios, a problem-based learning approach to advising can put the learning outcomes that students value least into real-world contexts that help them realize the importance and the practicality of a liberal education.

Let me briefly give a few examples. In advising premed students, I am often struck by how many of them are biology or chemistry majors. The first question I ask them is why. Invariably, they respond by saying that they want to go to medical school—a fair enough answer. But then I always come back with, “I am a bit confused. Can you help me? I thought you wanted to be doctor, not a biologist (or chemist). What do doctors do?” This is usually a stumper, but I do not leave it there. I try to pose a provocative problem: “Let’s say you are a doctor now. How would you relate to the difficulties a traditional Islamic woman faces...
when undergoing a standard physical examination?" There is no simple answer to this problem, and there are many variations on it. Consider the problem the musician Prince has with his potential hip replacement. Both examples raise the same issues for students.

Advising as problem-based learning challenges these students to rethink what makes up premedical studies. Rather than providing answers, it enables us to assign a research question: what learning would you need to have in your background to think through this problem? Students discover their own answers. For example, they might begin to consider how ethics or cultural anthropology or religious studies might integrate with their premedical studies. Given the assignment, students simply have to think about how practical liberal learning can affect the day-to-day issues they would be likely to encounter as doctors.

We can take a similar problem-based learning approach in any advising situation. How often do we ask students to explain what they mean when they say they want to major in English, for example, or political science? How often do we ask prospective business majors to tell us something that isn’t related to business or to talk about the people with whom they expect to work? How often do we ask education students to describe the classroom in which they might find themselves teaching? How often do we ask students to think about the difference between the requirements that make up an academic major and the integrated learning that makes up a field of study? For that matter, how often do we talk with students about the difference between completing the requirements for a major and understanding a field of study? Each of these questions sets a problem and can begin the problem-based learning process because each challenges students to think about their assumptions about learning.

As Richard Light (2001) has noted, questions like these encourage students to talk about bigger ideas with their advisers. Such conversations can affect students’ personal perspectives on learning and help them to integrate liberal learning more intentionally into their studies. And in talking with their advisers about bigger ideas, students begin to see not only how their learning affects their professional preparation, but also how it “fits into the bigger picture of their lives, and what new ideas might be worth considering” (Light 2001, 89). In these advising contexts, liberal learning becomes quite practical, and in the
Most of the students I have worked with have asked some version of this question: why hasn't someone talked to us about this before?

Conclusion

The problem is not that students are averse to the liberal learning outcomes AAC&U member institutions hold important. Rather, it is that we have been remiss in introducing and orienting students to the nature of liberal learning and university study. We have not equipped students to engage their learning intentionally, nor have we helped them to understand how their learning engages their lives. We have not demonstrated to them the interdisciplinary nature of liberal learning, and we have not modeled that ourselves.

None of this will be corrected through advising as students now experience it. Too often, advising has been considered the sorry stepchild in the academy—and perhaps rightly so. But if we hope to address the issues raised by our students’ own understandings of and attitudes toward liberal learning, then we must rethink advising; we must redefine advising as a practical liberal learning endeavor.

I have outlined just one possible iteration of advising as liberal learning. Through a problem-based learning approach, we can help students “encounter” the communities they live in locally, nationally, and globally. We can help them understand through experience that the ways we socially construct meaning are the same as the ways we learn to understand our own personal meanings. We can help them understand that the incongruities they encounter through liberal learning—incongruities that they might not otherwise encounter—are as open-ended as their daily experiences are.

This kind of advising can help students realize how their contextual and critical thinking continually helps them examine and be sensitive to new contexts that challenge their ways of understanding. Finally, we can help students understand that the liberal learning outcomes they say they value least in their undergraduate education are the very same ones that can help them examine their personal commitments to learning and to themselves. This is advising as it could be.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.

REFERENCES


